

US neo-cons uncertain of

By Jim Lobe

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WASHINGTON: Jubilant over the President George W. Bush's re-election victory just two months ago, neo-conservatives who played a leading role in shaping the radical trajectory of US foreign policy after the Sept 11, 2001, terrorist attacks appear increasingly divided on key issues and uncertain of their position in Bush's second term.

All are on board for the Jan 30 elections in Iraq, and military strikes against suspected Iranian nuclear facilities to prevent Teheran from getting a bomb. But they cannot seem to forge a consensus on US military strategy in Iraq, whether to demand greater military spending than the Bush administration appears comfortable with, or whether to back a policy of engagement with Iran prior to a military strike.

They are also worried about key appointments to second-term foreign policy positions, particularly that of US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick to serve as Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice's deputy, as well as other appointments to senior posts in the State Department.

But the biggest blow to their unity

and sense of purpose to date has been the deep split that has developed within their ranks following the death of Palestinian leader and "arch-fiend", Yaseer Arafat.

The emergence of a "moderate" successor in Palestinian Authority (PA) president-elect Mahmoud Abbas, coupled with his initial embrace by both the Bush administration and a realigned Israeli government seemingly determined to carry out its plan to disengage from Gaza by the end of this year, has drawn harsh criticism from hardline neo-conservatives.

These include Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer, and Centre for Security Policy (CSP) chief Frank Gaffney, who fear that both Bush and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, are moving down a "slippery slope" that will put Israel's security in serious jeopardy.

They doubtless saw a ray of light in the announcement on Friday by Sharon cutting all ties with the PA until it "take(s) the necessary steps to curb and stop terrorism", in retaliation for the killing of six Israelis and wounding of five others by

Palestinian militants at a checkpoint Thursday.

The split in neo-con ranks, of course, mirrors that which has taken place between the less-ideological elements in Israel's Likud Party, such as Sharon and Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and its more-extreme elements who have long opposed any Israeli retreat from the occupied territories for theological or nationalistic reasons.

Because Israel's security is so central to the neo-conservative worldview, the split between the hard-line neo-conservatives, who are closely aligned with Likud's extremists, and their more pragmatic brethren, such as Rice's top Middle East aide, Elliott Abrams, who lean more to Sharon and even Olmert, deeply threatens its unity and ideological coherence.

These developments are surprising in many ways given the jubilation of the neo-conservatives over Bush's election victory and subsequent decision to drop Secretary of State Colin Powell in his second term.

Within days, prominent neo-cons, such as Danielle Pletka, a Middle East specialist at Neo-Con Central, the

American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and their fellow-travellers, such as Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton, were being touted for top spots at the State Department and the National Security Council.

Meanwhile, hardliners like Gaffney and AEI's Michael Ledeen and David Frum were drawing up lists of new candidates for "regime change", including Iran, Syria, North Korea, China, and even Venezuela.

Since then, a number of unanticipated developments appear to have deflated their confidence. Indeed, by early this week, Frum, a former Bush speechwriter who co-authored a book last year with AEI's Richard Perle, the hub of Washington's neo-con network, was positively sullen over news of the latest appointments and recent statements on Iran and Syria by Bush himself.

The clearest of these developments, of course, was the continued deterioration of the US position in Iraq despite the levelling of Fallujah in late November, which neo-conservatives of all hues had confidently declared would mark a turning point

future policies

in the war.

The prediction just last week by Gen. Brent Scowcroft (ret), national security adviser to Bush's father and former President Gerald Ford, that Iraq was headed toward "incipient civil war", regardless of how the Jan. 30 elections turn out marked the final break of a long-time Bush loyalist and mainstream Republican with the neo-conservative foreign policy. But it also served as a dramatic reminder about how disastrously wrong the pre-war predictions by the neo-cons have turned out to be.

Scowcroft's statement, which came in a session in which another venerable foreign-policy graybeard, Zbigniew Brzezinski, offered an even more pessimistic forecast of imperial decline, quickly became the talk of the town — an exclamation point for the Establishment's accumulating horror over the lack of light at the end of the Iraqi tunnel.

While prominent neo-cons pooh-poohed the old guard for agreeing with "the left", their crouch has become ever more defensive and sullen.

With the insurgency as vigorous as

ever, many neo-conservatives began rubbing salt in old wounds, reviving complaints that Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had failed to deploy a large enough force, either during the invasion or now, with elections pending. Others revived arguments that the fatal mistake was in not relying more heavily on Iraqis themselves, both now and at the time of the invasion.

Indeed, Rumsfeld has now become another major point of contention among neo-conservatives with some, like the Weekly Standard's William Kristol and Donald Kagan, claiming that he should have been fired long ago for bungling the occupation, and others, such as Perle and military historian Victor Davis Hanson, rushing to his defence.

Meanwhile, Gaffney, who has defended Rumsfeld, offered the unkindest cut of all this week in the Washington Times, calling proposed administration cuts in missile defence and other big-money military programs to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan "Kerry-like" — a reference to the defeated Democratic contender for the presidency — and far

short of what is needed to maintain US global supremacy, which lies at the heart of the hawks' strategic vision.

Another nasty fight over Iran policy also blossomed in the neo-conservative-dominated Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), which, while united in accepting the necessity of ultimately "taking out" Teheran's presumed nuclear-weapons programme, found themselves deeply divided over whether to first "engage" Teheran by fully backing European initiatives to move straight to the "regime change" by-any-means-necessary-possible" option.

Meanwhile, neo-conservative hopes that Rice would either "straighten out" or permanently marginalize the State Department so as not to obstruct the hawks' second-term agenda, as Powell and his team tried to do during the first term, have largely been dashed with the appointment of Zoellick — a protege of both Scowcroft and former Secretary of State James Baker — and the likelihood that NATO Amb. Nick Burns, another Atlantic-oriented realist, will take the number three post. —*Dawn/The InterPress News Service.*